

PROSPECTING SMALL TROUT STREAMS

Leave Montana's famous rivers to the teeming hordes. Creeks and minor tributaries are where an angler can find fly-fishing solitude these days.

BY JOHN BARSNESS

One June day many years ago, a cousin and I were floating the Bitterroot near Missoula when we saw a good-looking little stream flowing into the river. We paddled my canoe to the bank and worked our way up the creek, casting dry flies onto the pools and deeper riffles. A quarter mile upstream, the creek flowed next to a gravel road. We were drifting our flies along the limestone riprap, where there just *had* to be a nice trout, when a pickup came down the road and pulled over above us. A middle-aged guy in a cowboy hat rolled his window down and asked, "Doing any good?"

I shook my head. "Nothing."

He smiled. "That's not surprising. This crick goes dry toward the end of July."

He rolled up his window and drove off; I didn't hear him laugh, but imagine he did. I waded into the middle of the creek, the water almost up to my waded knees, and grabbed a good-sized rock from the bottom. The only thing on it was clean water, no algae or insects. I dropped the rock into the stream and we hiked back to the canoe.

NO ONE FOR MILES A trout angler fishes solo on Red Rock Creek in the Centennial Mountains. Montana is laced with small, little-known streams, many with big trout.

JOHN JURCHECK

Like any sort of prospecting, the search for small-stream trout doesn't always pan out. But over the decades I've become more attuned to the signs of a possible find. In many cases, the least productive streams have super-clear water, exactly like the water in that beautiful little stream. The best trout streams usually have translucent, greenish water. That's because they're loaded with nutrients and organic matter, the microscopic meat and potatoes that feed aquatic insects that trout eat. On many streams, if you can clearly see all the rocks in the bottom of a pool, it isn't going to hold many trout—and sometimes none.

Streams don't have to go seasonally dry to have transparent water the rest of the year. Some feel the pain of acid mine drainage and other industrial pollution. The two upper forks of a small river near my home in Townsend illustrate the point. Both look pretty good, but one flows as clear as turpentine, the result of industrial pollution. The other fork has the telltale greenish water of a fertile stream, along with other indications of potential trout such as more bankside grass and brush. I test-fished the clear fork many years ago, mostly out of curiosity. It does contain some trout, but a 9-incher is a big one, and even the rainbows that size are like supermodels: skinny, with swelled heads.

The other fork is full of fat trout up to a foot long, occasionally bigger. Yet far more people fish the clearer fork, probably because it flows close to a highway and they can see it from their vehicles. The more productive fork can be reached only by a gravel road, and even then it rarely flows near the road. After getting permission from the landowner, you have to park, hike across a pasture, and then fight some willows to reach the bank. This is a little too much work for most anglers.

Accepted wisdom is that 90 percent of the

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fish are caught by 10 percent of the anglers. In Montana, I suspect this is partly because 90 percent of the anglers fish the same places everybody else does. They fish where they don't have to walk far from where they parked, and they park where everybody else does. You can usually find more (and less-educated) trout by hiking at least a half mile from any popular parking area before starting to fish. If you have to plow through some willows, so much the better.

Willows are always a good signpost for

decent fishing, and possibly great fishing. They shade small streams, cooling the relatively shallow water, and their roots create little still-water rooms where trout hide without much effort, close to the main current where food floats by. Willows also make casting more difficult, keeping average anglers away.

Some of Montana's very best small-stream fishing is in willowed-up waters miles from the nearest mountain. As the land gradient eases, the streams start to wind slowly back and forth. Apparently a lot of people think no mountains or riffles means no trout. It's true that often there are fewer trout than farther upstream in the "classic" water. But in many cases, flatland trout grow bigger. Almost all the 15- to 20-inch trout I've caught from small streams came from slow willow creeks.

A favorite stretch of stream I often fish with my wife, Eileen, flows right next to a public Bureau of Land Management campground. This may seem like a strange place to find good fishing, because the campground is pretty full all summer long. But most of the hundreds of anglers fish the same stretch of water day after day. The campground is fenced from surrounding pasture, meaning that cattle can't graze down the streambank, which is lined with a wide zone of willows, alders, and (perhaps most important) wild rosebushes. Most people don't like to bust through thorns. There's only one place where the bank can easily be reached, a clearing next to the main cluster of camping spots. Judging from the Styrofoam worm containers and empty snelled-hook packages on the bank, the pool by the clearing is the only place anybody else fishes on the entire half mile of stream. It's also the only pool where we've never caught a trout. Eileen and I rarely see a wading boot track along the rest of the creek's banks.

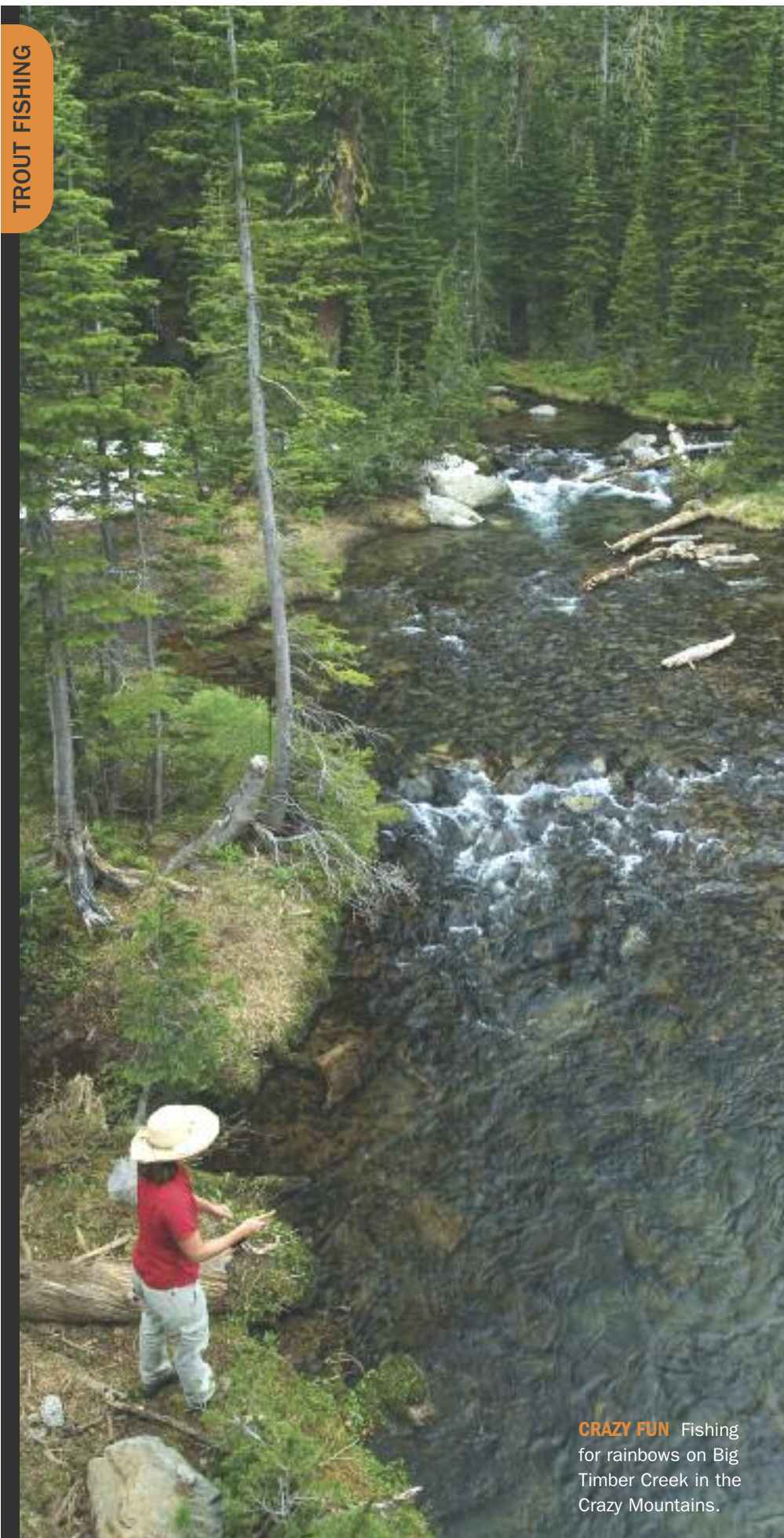
In addition to the campground stretch, the upper reaches of that creek hold quite a few trout. The best fishing is in a mile-long stretch



BANK-TO-BANK CASTING Clockwise from top left: Covering a pool on Wood Creek, west of Augusta near the Rocky Mountain Front; a tiny catch on Prickly Pear Creek near Helena; a brown fooled by a terrestrial imitation is landed on a small stream near Bozeman.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: NEAL & MI MISHLER; HENTON ROWE; DENVERBRIAN.COM



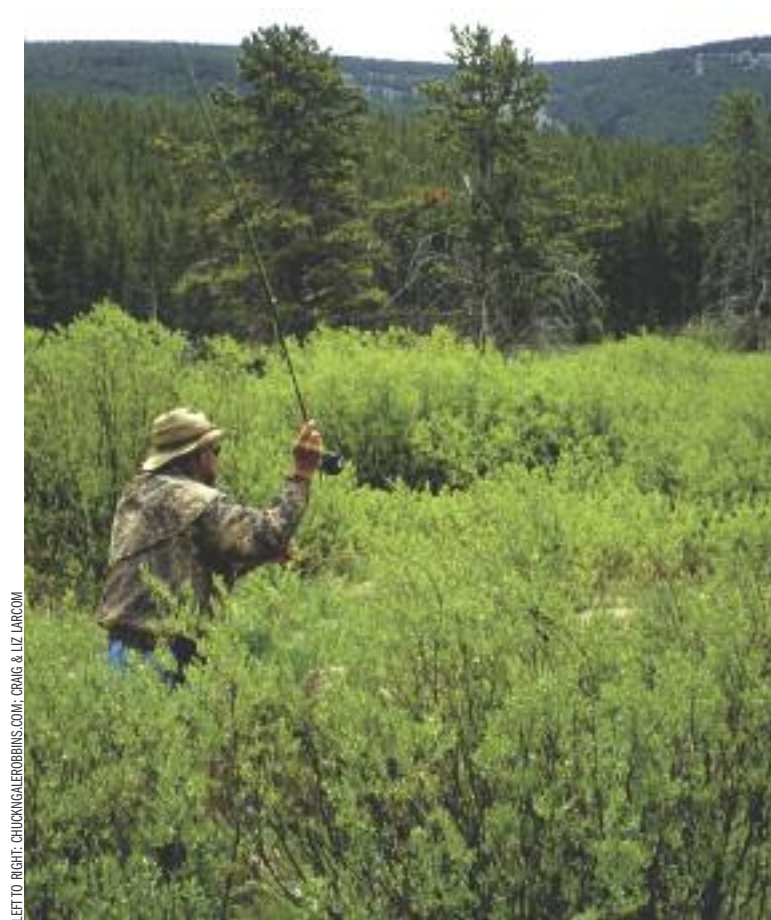
CRAZY FUN Fishing for rainbows on Big Timber Creek in the Crazy Mountains.

ERIK ARGENTI

Another general rule is that often the best creeks to fish for trout are near famous rivers.

of canyon not visible from the road. The canyon isn't really deep, but evidently it's deep enough to keep most people from hiking down and then hiking back up again. The steeper creek gradient in this mountain stretch produces fewer pools than stretches along the campground, but the pools are deeper. Many contain big conifer deadfalls. The fallen timber protects young trout from kingfishers and other predators while providing places for large fish to lurk. It also makes casting a little more difficult. Fortunately, accuracy isn't essential. Those fish see flies so rarely that they'll often come up through 2 or 3 feet of water to grab an elkhair caddis. A general rule of thumb for this and most other small streams: the bigger the log over the pool, the bigger the trout.

Often some sections of a creek hold a lot of trout, while other stretches are almost barren. Sometimes the best stream section is farther upstream, above an overgrazed stretch of water down in the valley; other times it's farther downstream. Don't give up on a stream just because you don't catch fish in one spot. Try other stretches. One classic piece of



LEFT TO RIGHT: CHUCK/NEALROBBINS.COM; CRAIG & LIZ LARCOM

IN THE THICK OF IT Above: Willows and other shrubs shade creeks, like this small tributary of the Big Hole River. Thick vegetation also discourages many anglers from reaching the prime pools. Above right: Netting a cutthroat in a Blackfoot River tributary.



meadow trout stream I fish in late summer is only a few hundred yards long. It's the lower end of a creek flowing into a big reservoir, and the only section of the creek that holds many trout is trapped between the reservoir and an irrigation head gate. Above the head gate the stream is essentially a ditch, but below the head gate the water meanders under willows and grassy banks. I stumbled upon this stretch while hunting Hungarian partridge one fall in grain fields along the stream's grassy corridor. As my bird dog and I were wading a riffle between two pools to reach wheat stubble on the other side, a half dozen rainbows spooked up into the shallow water. I came back the next day with a fly rod and caught several trout that were fat from eating grasshoppers blown down from the grassy banks.

Some of Montana's best creeks to fish for trout are near famous rivers. One reason is that famous rivers tend to grow big trout because the water is fertile, and their feeder streams contribute to this fertility. Another is that famous rivers attract anglers—but only to the rivers themselves. Drift boats of hatch-

matchers float down the renowned blue-ribbon waters in long lines like freight trains, while local tributaries are almost empty of anglers—and full of nice trout.

Sometimes feeder streams are even more fertile—and thus produce more and bigger trout—than the main river. Rock Creek is an example. Bigger than some rivers, Rock Creek flows into the Clark Fork 20 miles upstream from Missoula. As one of Montana's designated blue-ribbon trout streams, Rock Creek is by no means a secret. But most anglers drive upstream from I-90 and fish the upper stretches, usually right next to the road. What's not so well known is that Rock Creek's incredibly fertile water also bumps up the quality of the Clark Fork. Hardly anybody fishes the lower half mile of Rock Creek, or the Clark Fork just below the mouth of Rock Creek. That's their loss.

Similar things happen on a smaller scale at the mouths of many small streams flowing into rivers. Some of these are rarely fished because the stream is on the other side of a

river from the road. Reaching them requires heavy-duty wading or a canoe, and most people just don't bother.

The easiest time to prospect any small stream is during grasshopper season, which peaks in August. If any trout are in a stream, they'll come up to a hopper pattern and will also come farther from fly-snagging cover to grab your fly. The weather is often so warm in late summer that the best fishing will be early in the morning or late in the evening. But hey, that's when most of us aren't working.

While fishing is usually a social sport, I grew up in Montana when going fishing meant getting away from town and “lots” of people (lots of people always being a very relative thing in Montana). I always enjoy fishing with Eileen and some friends, but our famous rivers start to lose their allure when somebody's edging closer to where I'm casting, or when drift boats resemble barge traffic on the Mississippi. Both make prospecting for creek trout seem ever more desirable—even if occasionally all I find is a dry hole. 🐾